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LA METTRIE'S VIEW OF MAN AS A MACHINE.¹

Summed up briefly, the facts of Julien Offray de la Mettrie's life are as follows: He was born December 25, 1709, in St. Malo. He first studied the humanities with brilliant success at the college of Coutances and then in Paris. In 1725 he studied natural philosophy at the college of Harcourt and took the degree of doctor of medicine at Rheims and began to practice there. In 1733 he went to Leyden and studied under Boerhaave. The next year he translated a treatise of his master and added to it an original work of his own which gained him the jealousy of older physicians. The next years were spent in St. Malo where besides carrying on an active practice he translated and wrote medical works of original value. In 1742 he went to Paris and became physician of the guards but lost his patron, the Duke of Gramont, in an early battle. In the same campaign, La Mettrie suffered from a severe fever, and after his recovery had his philosophic conjectures printed under the title "The Natural History of the Soul." This work aroused the wrath of the theologians and in 1746 he went to Leyden to philosophize in peace. Here he wrote "Penelope," a satire on quackery, and "Man a Machine." The latter brought down upon him the displeasure of the Leyden clericals of all denominations. His genius and unfortunate condition procured him a refuge in Prussia with a pension from Frederick the Great. He went to Berlin in 1748 where he was made a member of the Royal Academy of Science. He died November 11, 1751, leaving a widow and a five year old daughter. His royal patron closed the eulogy which he wrote for the Royal Academy with these words:

"La Mettrie was born with a fund of natural and inexhaustible gaiety; he had a quick mind, and such a fertile imagination that it made flowers grow in the arid field of medicine. Nature had made him an orator and a philosopher; but a yet more precious gift which he received from her was a pure soul and an obliging heart. All those who are not imposed upon by the pious insults of the theologians mourn in La Mettrie a good man and a wise physician."

During his life La Mettrie was subject to persecutions and also to the disappointment that he found no serious treatment of the great problem he had raised among men of science but on the con-

¹ An English translation of La Mettrie's well-known work, *L'homme machine*, has recently been published by The Open Court Publishing Company (Chicago, 1912) with philosophical and historical notes by Gertrude Carman Bussey.

trary was pelted with dirty accusations. He was of a buoyant temperament, and during the worst times of his life he laughed at trouble and showed himself ready to go down in the shipwreck of the storm which his bold love of truth had provoked. As an instance of the attacks to which he was exposed, we quote one of the opinions of the historians of philosophy uttered by Professor Hettner, who says of him: "Lamettrie is a bold libertine who sees in materialism only the justification of his profligacy," and this opinion is recorded in one of the best histories of philosophy.



JULIEN OFFRAY DE LA METTRIE.

A contemporary artist, G. F. Schmidt, made an engraving of the ridiculed advocate of mechanicalism with the intention of representing him as Democritus the laughing philosopher. It is the only portrait of him that has come down to us, and since La Mettrie at the time was an object of general contempt it attracted a good deal of attention. A French actor and a friend of La Mettrie, M. Désormes, had the picture accompanied by a few French lines which read as follows:

"Sous ces traits vifs, tu vois le maître
Des jeux, des ris et des bons mots;
Trop hardi d'avoir de son être
Osé débrouiller le cahos.
Sans un sage il était la victime des sots."

We translate these lines as follows:

"These features show truly the master
Of jollities, laughter and wit;
Too bold he was in his nature
To take off the corners of it.
He would have been but for one sage
The victim alas! of the fools of his age."

Lessing the great art critic not only of his age, but probably of all time, saw this picture and used it as an instance to prove one of his theories. He was not an admirer of La Mettrie, and seeing in the sarcastic laugh of this modern Democritus a grin, he condemned in a rather hasty and overcritical mood all the pictures which portrayed laughing faces.

Lessing says in his *Laokoon*: "La Mettrie who had himself painted and engraved as a second Democritus laughs only the first time one looks at him. Repeated contemplation changes the philosopher into a fool, his laughter changes into a grin." On the basis of this instance Lessing declares that neither a sculptor nor a painter should represent anything that can not but be transitory, because phenomena which burst out suddenly and disappear at once, as for instance laughter, produce through their prolongation in art an unnatural and therefore unpleasant impression, which changes what might be pleasant into something disgusting and repelling. This view goes too far. With all due respect for Lessing's ability as a critic, we do not share his opinion in this special point. It is by no means inadvisable to paint galloping horses or flying birds or a dancing Bacchante. We deem it quite possible to present laughing portraits which will always remain pleasant, but in the present case we must bear in mind that the artist intended to depict a sarcastic grin rather than an amiable smile. La Mettrie's character was not such as to win the sympathy of his contemporaries; he ridiculed others with biting sarcasm and, as expressed in the verse of Désormes, he disdained to take off the corners of his satirical nature.

La Mettrie was the first to uphold in unmistakable language the application of the mechanistic principle to man. In addition to publishing his book *L'homme machine* he carried on a long and interesting controversy with his adversaries, among whom his main victim was the famous naturalist Haller, a Swiss by birth, a poet and at the same time professor of medicine in the University of Göttingen.

La Mettrie's significance in the history of philosophy has sometimes been underrated and is now often overrated. He is decidedly a prominent thinker, a representative of a great and important truth, the mechanistic principle, and he has brought it before the public in a most forcible way so as to have it connected with his name for all time to come. He was a martyr of his cause, and, in fear of being lynched, he had to flee from France and again from Holland, without being able to take with him any property nor even sufficient clothes for the journey, but he had the good fortune to be protected by a royal genius, the great and noble king Frederick the Second of Prussia, who was rightly surnamed the Great not only because he gained many victories on the battlefield against great odds, but above all because he was a philosopher on the throne.

It is a pity that La Mettrie, this clear thinker and exact scientist, was yet small enough to attack his enemies in a sarcastic way which ought to have been beneath the dignity of so great a man. Poor Haller, trained in the ponderous methods of German science, a pious Christian of a most reactionary and dogmatic trend of thought, was scarcely a match for the nimble wit of his French antagonist and so he fell repeatedly a prey to the traps which La Mettrie laid for him. Haller did not even understand the irony with which La Mettrie dedicated to him the book *L'homme machine*, and he did not see that the plagiarism which his enemy committed was really a satire and a parody. La Mettrie published a French translation of Haller's love verses and praised the poet, but in doing so La Mettrie sarcastically turned Haller's tender sentiments into frivolous jokes.

We can easily understand how an impartial reader of *L'homme machine* will become prejudiced against the author by the vulgar instances which are introduced to prove the contention of the book. La Mettrie would have been a better representative of his theory if his presentation had been more dignified, and if he had abstained from the improprieties of his humor.

Without shutting our eyes to all his shortcomings we do not mean to belittle La Mettrie or to depreciate the work he has done for a great cause. Let us remember what his noble protector Frederick the Great said about him in his eulogy when he praised not only the high standing of his philosophical compass but also the purity of his life which was indubitable in spite of the cynicism of his language.

La Mettrie's sarcasm lays him open to the suspicion of malevo-

lence, but we know through Frederick the Great that he was an amiable friend and it is not likely that his satirical view need be interpreted as a mean streak in his character. We can not assume that he took delight in hurting the feelings of others, but we may easily understand how the witty Frenchman enjoyed a laugh at his enemies' expense and how difficult it was for him to suppress a joke—especially if the joke served a higher purpose, if it helped to point out the truth of his cause.

A key to the motive of La Mettrie's sarcasm and his disregard for the feelings of others may be found in the preface to the edition of his collected works where he confesses to cling to the principle thus expressed: "Write as if thou wert alone in the universe and hadst nothing to fear from the jealousies and prejudices of the people. Otherwise thou wilt miss thy purpose."

It has been pointed out by Friedrich Albert Lange and others, that there is not the slightest reason to doubt the sincerity of La Mettrie's work. Certainly he did not seek pecuniary gain, for he could have fared much better in life if he had kept quiet. He was an able and very successful physician and we learn from his medical satires that he knew but too well how much better quackery paid than a rational and honest treatment of patients. In fighting for honesty in the medical profession, he knew that he would encounter much hostility, yet he preferred stating the truth to the easier method of following the ways of his colleagues by gaining the confidence of the powerful and influential to his own advantage.

We need not approve of La Mettrie's methods in order to think that there is no reason to doubt his good intention when holding up his opponents to ridicule, and some of them too are certainly at fault, for their accusations of licentiousness have never been proved. Even his enemies have never produced anything positive against him which would show his character in a bad light. Though it would be out of place to present him as a saint, we have no reason to assume that he was worse than the average men of his time. One of the worst accusations that have repeatedly been urged against him was the good word he spoke in defense of criminals, and yet herein we must recognize that in the progress of civilization the same thought has been expressed by judges as well as by the public in general, and our present methods of treating criminals has decidedly approached La Mettrie's conception of justice.

We must recognize that La Mettrie has become the scapegoat of materialism, and thinkers who accept his very theories have long

been in the habit, as F. A. Lange pointed out, of excusing themselves by denouncing La Mettrie, and pouring out upon his head the vials of their indignation, protesting that they themselves were not of his type. It was a cheap way of gaining the reader's *captatio benevolentiae*, at the cost of a much maligned representative of materialism.

La Mettrie remained the scapegoat of an ostracized philosophy until Friedrich Albert Lange turned the tide. In his *History of Materialism*, Lange stood up for La Mettrie and corrected the wrong impressions, due to slander and misrepresentation. Lange's chapter on La Mettrie as the most prominent and most consistent representative of materialism² is probably still the best that has been written on him. It has been well supplemented recently by Dr. Ernst Bergmann, a *Privatdozent* of Leipsic, in his little book *Die Satiren des Herrn Maschine* (Leipsic, 1913).

We sum up: La Mettrie states an important truth and we grant that all motions, including the entire activity of the human brain, are mechanical and that therefore and in this sense man is a machine. On the other hand we do not hesitate to condemn in La Mettrie his onesidedness, the impropriety of his presentation in some details and the sarcastic manner of his polemics.

By means of short extracts we will let La Mettrie state his position so that the reader can easily form his own opinion of it. He says:

"It is not enough for a wise man to study nature and truth; he should dare state the truth for the benefit of the few who are willing and able to think. As for the rest, who are voluntarily slaves of prejudice, they can no more attain truth, than frogs can fly.

"I reduce to two the systems of philosophy which deal with man's soul. The first and older system is materialism; the second is spiritualism."

La Mettrie claims that his theory is based on experience, but obviously experience is not in favor of the mechanistic theory. Our belief in mechanicalism is the result of a purely *a priori* consideration. Even at the present day chemistry must confess that a mechanical explanation of strictly chemical processes is as yet impossible. We must assume the theory of mechanicalism as an inevitable conclusion of the principle that all changes are transformation, but we have not yet demonstrated this conclusion in experience.

A chemical combination shows absolutely new qualities which

² *Geschichte des Materialismus*, Part IV, Chapter 2. (Vol. I, pp. 326, 359.)

can not be explained as a mixture of the qualities of its ingredients, and we have as yet no means to account for higher combinations by a mechanical interaction. Nevertheless many chemists accept the mechanistic principle as applicable to chemical combinations because speculation can discover no other way of explaining processes of any kind than as results of a mechanical interaction or cooperation of parts. Under these conditions we see ourselves obliged to assume that there is a molecular mechanics, the proportions of which, however, are too infinitesimally small for our best microscopes to make visible. Accordingly we must be satisfied with the belief that ultimately they are mechanical. So far at least we know nothing to the contrary, nothing that would definitely destroy our hope that there are no processes the nature of which could not ultimately be explained by the interrelations of their parts.

La Mettrie is unconscious that he is arguing *a priori*, and it is a common occurrence that those naturalists who clamor most for the necessity of limiting science to experience are most strongly carried away by *a priori* methods. They believe that we must rely on experience alone, and should not be allowed to generalize; yet naturalists of this type are most insistent in declaring that natural laws suffer no exceptions. The statement may be true enough, but it can never be proved by experience nor by induction; in its sweeping universality it is obviously a deduction from general principles. La Mettrie is no exception to the general rule, and his many evidences of the interconnection between soul and body, true as they may be, can not carry conviction, because they prove nothing but the fact stated, i. e., an interconnection between soul and body, not their identity.

"Man is so complicated a machine that it is impossible to get a clear idea of the machine beforehand, and hence impossible to define it. For this reason, all the investigations have been vain, which the greatest philosophers have made *a priori*, that is to say, in so far as they use, as it were, the wings of the spirit. Thus it is only *a posteriori* or by trying to disentangle the soul from the organs of the body, so to speak, that one can reach the highest probability concerning man's own nature, even though one can not discover with certainty what his nature is.

"Let us then take in our hands the staff of experience, paying no heed to the accounts of all the idle theories of philosophers. To be blind and to think that one can do without this staff is the worst kind of blindness. How truly a contemporary writer says that only

vanity fails to gather from secondary causes the same lessons as from primary causes!"

It is true enough that we need the staff of experience; we must investigate the facts, but our main conclusion will be the result of a deduction from general principles. Who for instance can prove the truth of evolution from experience? How is it possible to collect all the facts in question? There is so much talk about the missing link! We ought to bear in mind that if one link in the chain is discovered there are others missing. In all scientific reasoning we have to employ both the method of logic, which is *a priori*, and of the facts of experience, which is *a posteriori*. The two are the web and woof of all scientific work and without either our endeavor to widen the horizon of our positive knowledge will yield no profit.

Here are specimens of La Mettrie's arguments:

"In disease the soul is sometimes hidden, showing no sign of life; sometimes it is so inflamed by fury that it seems to be doubled; sometimes, imbecility vanishes and the convalescence of an idiot produces a wise man. Sometimes, again, the greatest genius becomes imbecile and loses the sense of self. Adieu then to all that fine knowledge, acquired at so high a price, and with so much trouble! Here is a paralytic who asks if his leg is in bed with him; there is a soldier who thinks that he still has the arm which has been cut off. The memory of his old sensations, and of the place to which they were referred by his soul, is the cause of his illusion, and of this kind of delirium. The mere mention of the member which he has lost is enough to recall it to his mind, and to make him feel all its motions; and this causes him an indefinable and inexpressible kind of imaginary suffering. This man cries like a child at death's approach, while this other jests. What was needed to change the bravery of Caius Julius, Seneca, or Petronius into cowardice or faintheartedness? Merely an obstruction in the spleen, in the liver, an impediment in the portal vein. Why? Because the imagination is obstructed along with the viscera, and this gives rise to all the singular phenomena of hysteria and hypochondria.

"What can I add to the stories already told of those who imagine themselves transformed into wolf-men, cocks or vampires, or of those who think that the dead feed upon them? Why should I stop to speak of the man who imagines that his nose or some other member is of glass? The way to help this man regain his faculties and his own flesh-and-blood nose is to advise him to sleep on hay, lest he break the fragile organ, and then to set fire to the hay that he

may be afraid of being burned—a fear which has sometimes cured paralysis.....

“As the motion of the blood is calmed, a sweet feeling of peace and quiet spreads through the whole mechanism.....

“Is the circulation too quick, the soul can not sleep. Is the soul too much excited, the blood can not be quieted: it gallops through the veins with an audible murmur. Such are the two opposite causes of insomnia.....

“The human body is a machine which winds its own springs. It is the living image of perpetual movement. Nourishment keeps up the movements which fever excites. Without food, the soul pines away, goes mad, and dies exhausted.....

“Pope understood well the full power of greediness when he said:

“‘Caius is ever moral, ever grave,
Thinks who endures a knave is next a knave,
Save just at dinner—then prefers no doubt,
A rogue with ven’son to a saint without.’

“Elsewhere he says:

“‘See the same man in vigor, in the gout
Alone, in company, in place or out,
Early at business and at hazard late,
Mad at a fox chase, wise at a debate,
Drunk at a borough, civil at a ball,
Friendly at Hackney, faithless at White Hall.’....

“Raw meat makes animals fierce, and it would have the same effect on man.....

“We think we are, and in fact we are, good men, only as we are gay or brave; everything depends on the way our machine is running.....

“In general, the form and the structure of the brains of quadrupeds are almost the same as those of the brain of man; the same shape, the same arrangement everywhere, with this essential difference, that of all the animals man is the one whose brain is largest, and, in proportion to its mass, more convoluted than the brain of any other animal.... Fish have large heads, but these are void of sense, like the heads of many men. Fish have no *corpus callosum*, and very little brain, while insects entirely lack brain.....

“I shall draw the conclusions which follow clearly from these incontestable observations: 1st, that the fiercer animals are, the less brain they have; 2d, that this organ seems to increase in size in proportion to the gentleness of the animal; 3d, that nature seems

here eternally to impose a singular condition, that the more one gains in intelligence the more one loses in instinct.

"Do not think, however, that I wish to infer by that, that the size alone of the brain, is enough to indicate the degree of tameness in animals; the quality must correspond to the quantity, and the solids and liquids must be in that due equilibrium which constitutes health.

"If, as is ordinarily observed, the imbecile does not lack brain, his brain will be deficient in its consistency—for instance, in being too soft. The same thing is true of the insane, and the defects of their brains do not always escape our investigation. But if the causes of imbecility, insanity, etc., are not obvious, where shall we look for the causes of the diversity of all minds? They would escape the eyes of a lynx and of an argus. A mere nothing, a tiny fibre, something that could never be found by the most delicate anatomy, would have made of Erasmus and Fontenelle two idiots, and Fontenelle himself speaks of this very fact in one of his best dialogues."

In comparing the morality of animals and men, La Mettrie censures human behavior, for, says he,

"Our compatriots fight, Swiss against Swiss, brother against brother, recognize each other, and yet capture and kill each other without remorse, because a prince pays for the murder."

He has an excuse for criminals, saying:

"I believe and admit that these wretches do not for the most part feel at the time the enormity of their actions.... But it is much to be wished that excellent physicians might be the only judges.... If crime carries with it its own more or less cruel punishment, why should we frighten the imagination of weak minds by a hell?"

La Mettrie's sarcasm comes out in his presentation of the case of theism *vs.* atheism. He claims to be the skeptic who would remain impartial. He pretends to have a leaning towards theism and introduces his atheistic views by some Pyrrhonian, whom he incidentally calls "this wretch" (*cet abominable homme*):

"I do not mean to call in question the existence of a supreme being; on the contrary it seems to me that the greatest degree of probability is in favor of this belief. But since the existence of this being goes no further than that of any other toward proving the need of worship, it is a theoretic truth with very little practical value. Therefore, since we may say, after such long experience, that re-

ligion does not imply exact honesty, we are authorized by the same reasons to think that atheism does not exclude it....

"Let us not lose ourselves in the infinite, for we are not made to have the least idea thereof, and are absolutely unable to get back to the origin of things. Besides it does not matter for our peace of mind, whether matter be eternal or have been created, whether there be or be not a God. How foolish to torment ourselves so much about things which we can not know, and which would not make us any happier even were we to gain knowledge about them!...

"I do not take either side.

"*'Non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites.'*

"This is what I said to one of my friends, a Frenchman, as frank a Pyrronian as I, a man of much merit, and worthy of a better fate. He gave me a very singular answer in regard to the matter. 'It is true,' he told me, 'that the *pro* and *con* should not disturb at all the soul of a philosopher, who sees that nothing is proved with clearness enough to force his consent, and that the arguments offered on one side are neutralized by those of the other. However,' he continued, 'the universe will never be happy, unless it is atheistic.' Here are this wretch's reasons. If atheism, said he, were generally accepted, all the forms of religion would then be destroyed and cut off at the roots. No more theological wars, no more soldiers of religion—such terrible soldiers! Nature infected with a sacred poison, would regain its rights and its purity. Deaf to all other voices, tranquil mortals would follow only the spontaneous dictates of their own being, the only commands which can never be despised with impunity and which alone can lead us to happiness through the pleasant paths of virtue.

"Such is natural law: whoever rigidly observes it is a good man and deserves the confidence of all the human race. Whoever fails to follow it scrupulously affects, in vain, the specious exterior of another religion; he is a scamp or a hypocrite whom I distrust....

"We do not seek here the votes of the crowd. Whoever raises in his heart altars to superstition, is born to worship idols and not to thrill to virtue.

"But since all the faculties of the soul depend to such a degree on the proper organization of the brain and of the whole body, that apparently they are but this organization itself, the soul is clearly an enlightened machine. For finally, even if man alone had received a share of natural law, would he be any less a machine for that?"

La Mettrie's conclusion is this:

"The soul is therefore but an empty word, of which no one has any idea, and which an enlightened man should use only to signify the part in us that thinks. . . . He is to the ape, and the most intelligent animals, as the planetary pendulum of Huyghens is to a watch of Julien Leroy. . . . I believe that thought is so little incompatible with organized matter, that it seems to be one of its properties on a par with electricity, the faculty of motion, impenetrability, extension, etc."

As to our destiny after death La Mettrie again introduces a bit of sarcasm and under the pretext of skepticism argues in favor of the possibility of immortal machines. Stating that "we know absolutely nothing about the subject," he continues:

"To assert that an immortal machine is a chimera or a logical fiction, is to reason as absurdly as caterpillars would reason if, seeing the cast-off skins of their fellow-caterpillars, they should bitterly deplore the fate of their species, which to them would seem to come to nothing. The soul of these insects (for each animal has its own) is too limited to comprehend the metamorphoses of nature. Never one of the most skilful among them could have imagined that it was destined to become a butterfly. It is the same with us. What more do we know of our destiny than of our origin? Let us then submit to an invincible ignorance on which our happiness depends."

It is worth while noticing that the practical application of his views comes ultimately to the same kind of ethics that religious people would preach.

"On the other hand, there is so much pleasure in doing good, in recognizing and appreciating what one receives, so much satisfaction in practising virtue, in being gentle, humane, kind, charitable, compassionate and generous that I consider as sufficiently punished any one who is unfortunate enough not to have been born virtuous. . . .

"He who so thinks will be wise, just, tranquil about his fate, and therefore happy. He will await death without either fear or desire, and will cherish life (hardly understanding how disgust can corrupt a heart in this place of many delights); he will be filled with reverence, gratitude, affection, and tenderness for nature, in proportion to his feeling of the benefits he has received from nature; he will be happy, in short, in feeling nature, and in being present at the enchanting spectacle of the universe, and he will surely never destroy nature either in himself or in others. More than that! Full of humanity, this man will love human character even in his enemies.

Judge how he will treat others. He will pity the wicked without hating them; in his eyes, they will be but mis-made men. But in pardoning the faults of the structure of mind and body, he will none the less admire the beauties and virtues of both. . . . and following the natural law given to all animals, he will not wish to do to others what he would not wish them to do to him.

"Let us then conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified. . . . Such is my system, or rather the truth, unless I am much deceived. It is short and simple. Dispute it now who will."

P. C.

THE SPIRIT IN THE WHEELS.

THE MECHANISM OF THE UNIVERSE AS SEEN BY A THEIST.

Dr. James Thompson Bixby has published under the title *The Open Secret* a book which he characterizes as "A Study of Life's Deeper Forces,"¹ and the first problem he attacks is the question of vitality and mechanism. All other problems which he discusses are mere side issues. They are treated in nine more chapters entitled: The Cosmic Motor Power, Atom and Spirit, Purpose in Nature, Law and Providence, Good the Final Goal, Fate or Choice, Our Self-Made World, Partners in World-Making, Search the Deep Things.

Dr. Bixby is a theist; he recognizes the significance of mechanism, but takes his stand on vitalism. He finds the most appropriate allegory for his view in Ezekiel's vision of the winged cherubim, which has been called the "spirit of the living creatures in the wheels." He grants that the mechanics of these wheels is impossible, nevertheless the general idea symbolized by this vision is not merely quite rational but most significant and instructive.

Dr. Bixby continues: "The essential lesson of the vision is that every living creature has around him some revolving machinery, and that within all the mechanical wheel-works which are visible there is a living soul as the motor power and directing agency of the enclosing engine."

Dr. Bixby's book is written from the standpoint of an advanced teleology. The author is sufficiently acquainted with modern science to understand the scientific position and states it in fairness and without animosity; yet he condemns it not only as utterly wrong, but also as chilling our faith and as dangerous.

¹ Published by the American Unitarian Association, Boston, 1912.